Caroline Wisler on Ringing the Bells at the Banner of Peace

Early in the fall semester, Stefan, another American Research Center Sofia (ARCS) fellow and doctoral student from the History Department at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and I spoke about visiting the Banner of Peace Monument, a socialist monument located in Mladost, southeast of the Sofia city center. Not until late November, when I had only a couple of days remaining on my visa and on what may have been one of the most uninviting days of soggy grey weather since our arrival in September, did we start in the general direction of the monument. We were unsure of precisely how to get there. At the end of the city bus-line, where we were the only two left on the initially overcrowded bus, we headed out on foot. We carefully avoided the waves of water surging off the tires of passing vehicles as they sped through ankle-deep puddles when they came and went from the massive shopping centers huddled next to the highway.

The monument was situated centrally in the International Park of Peace, on the top of a small rise just next to the noise and bustle of the highway and commercial center. They both dwarfed the monument’s oddly unassuming 37-meter high central belfry. In 1979, when the monument was first inaugurated, it would have likely appeared more impressive, having greater visibility in the landscape. Now, it appeared defeated and quite forgotten in comparison to the activity of the shopping center nearby. On this day, the only other visitors to the monument were a dog searching for his lunch and a sleeping guard, reclining comfortably in his kiosk. The stairs leading up to the monument looked less like a processional route and more like a staggered foundation struggling to hold the neglected monument upright. Thin, gangly trees obscured the space leading to the belfry and circular enclosure of nearly 100 bells, each representing a country or international organization which contributed to the monument’s creation. As Stefan and I moved counterclockwise around the monument, it became clear that many of the bells had been removed, damaged or defaced in the years since the original Banner of Peace program was discontinued in 1990, perhaps even earlier.

The inauguration of the Banner of Peace Monument marked the occasion of the first International Children’s Assembly “Banner of Peace” in Sofia, which was held in accord with the International Year of the Child designated by UNESCO in 1979. The program was created by Lyudmila Zhivkova and continued after her death, in 1981, until 1990. The motto of the Children’s Assembly program, still visible on the monument, was “unity, creativity and beauty.” It encouraged the peaceful interaction of children from all over the world, but also suggested that all individuals can contribute to peace, upon which the future relies, through the embodiment of this motto.

The title “Banner of Peace” has further significance, however, and references the Roerich Pact of 1935, signed into law by the United States and the majority of member states of the Pan-American Union. The Pact was intended to protect artistic and scientific institutions as well as cultural monuments, during times of both war and peace. The Banner of Peace, a white flag with a red circle within which are three red spheres, designated these sites as neutral. Furthermore, for Nicholas Roerich, who attributed the ideas of the Pact, a nation’s cultural heritage was of global significance and had the potential to facilitate unity and peace: cultural heritage has the unique ability to unite despite the differences it
may embody. These principles were and continue to be repeated within subsequent international agreements such as The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954) and in the development of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention (1972).

Despite the principles that the Banner of Peace Monument in Sofia embraces, the bells composing the monument and representing so many of the participating countries and international organizations, are decaying. Some have been stolen and others defaced. Some bells convey sharp hypocrisy: those from the countries of Syria, Cyprus, Colombia, Israel and Yugoslavia, among others, made me consider the events that have occurred in the years intervening the dedication of this monument. A sign at the base of the monument instructs visitors that only children may ring the bells and then, not too loudly. Perhaps this sign is as revealing as the condition of the overlooked monument.

The state of the monument indicates how the process of peace has fluctuated over time. Additionally, it illustrates how the cultural landscape can communicate that which is typically written and spoken of elsewhere. It is this understanding that encourages me to continue looking at cultural landscape as a source of both information and inspiration, in particular for its potential in peace-building efforts. It also suggests the importance of a trans-disciplinary approach, one which was found during my experience at ARCS, where I could consider the landscape from the perspective of my colleagues: a historian, anthropologist, archaeologist, sociologist and classicist, in turn.

Caroline Wisler is a doctoral student in the Department of Landscape Architecture and a FLAS Fellow for Academic Year 2012 – 2013. With the joint support of a Research Fellowship from the American Research Center Sofia (ARCS), Caroline spent the fall semester conducting research on cultural heritage and studying the Serbo-Croatian language in Sofia, Bulgaria.